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DEPARTMENT FOR DS/TIA/ITA, DS/IP/WHA, WHA/CEN

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TAGS: [ASEC](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ES](#)

SUBJECT: REPORTS OF ARMED GROUPS FORMING IN EL SALVADOR

Classified by the Ambassador; Reason 1.4(d).

11. (S/NF) Summary: Beginning on December 13, 2008, numerous articles have appeared in the local media claiming illegal armed groups are active in the countryside of El Salvador. The articles quote the highest levels of the Salvadoran security and political structures, who varyingly confirm they have heard reports of the formation and activities of these alleged groups, and call for investigations into their existence. RSO recently spoke with a senior member of the National Civilian Police (PNC) Criminal Intelligence Division, who dismissed the press reports as election propaganda and stated that there is no increased risk to U.S. citizens living or visiting El Salvador. He also stated, however, that there are active political indoctrination campaigns which may lead to protests and violence by either side of the political spectrum if the upcoming elections are seen as tainted. (Left-wing) FMLN contacts have asserted the articles are an (conservative, pro-U.S.) ARENA-led propaganda campaign aimed at bolstering support for January 18 legislative and municipal elections. Nevertheless, the Foreign Minister has committed to reporting on the presence of armed groups to the UN and OAS. Embassy continues to evaluate the pre-election security situation and has developed a robust security program for election observation efforts. End Summary.

DECEMBER FLURRY OF ARTICLES ON ARMED GROUPS

12. (U) On December 13, 2008, articles began to appear in the local media claiming that illegal armed groups are acting in the countryside of El Salvador. The first article, which appeared in the center-right La Prensa Grafica (LPG) newspaper stated that the Salvadoran Ministry of Defense was investigating reports that groups armed with "weapons of war," including automatic weapons and grenades, had been formed in various regions of El Salvador, particularly in areas that were strongholds of the leftist guerilla groups during the country's civil war. The article included a map highlighting seven areas of the country where these groups are claimed to exist.

13. (U) The second article, which appeared on December 14, also in LPG, claimed that the Salvadoran National Security Council has stated that there are more than forty of these armed groups. However, the sub-headline stated that there is no proof these groups are politically motivated. Officials from both of the major political parties were quoted as calling for investigations into the veracity of the claims. In a separate article on the same page, the Attorney General stated that there has been an ongoing inquiry into the existence of these groups for several years, but he refused to elaborate on the nature or results of the investigation.

TRYING TO TIE THE REPORTS TO THE FMLN

14. (C) Media have attempted to tie the groups to the FMLN. For four consecutive days, beginning December 13, one or both dailies, LPG and (conservative) El Diario de Hoy (EDH), published articles adjacent to those discussing the armed groups, detailing an annual FMLN commemorative ceremony in the town of El Paisnal. The ceremony includes a military style march performed by teenagers with toy rifles. Pictures of the ceremony have accompanied brief articles on

the ceremony, but were laid out in such a way so that they looked as though they belonged to the articles about the armed groups.

15. (C) FMLN party head Medardo Gonzalez and Legislative Assembly Deputy Benito Lara are in the El Paisnal photos. On December 15, Poloff met with Deputy Lara, along with Deputy Hugo Martinez. They denounced the articles, accusing ARENA of using fear tactics out of desperation in a response to recent poll figures that show the FMLN ahead. Lara explained that the ceremony depicted is very public, and is performed every year to commemorate the death of Dimas Rodriguez, a combatant during the Civil War. He said the march is performed specifically for young people not old enough to remember the war, and is designed to remind them of the atrocities in order to prevent them from happening again. Lara noted that it was curious that the story would surface now, in conjunction with the revelation of illegal armed groups, and pointed out that the images used were from a year ago. 10. On January 5, FMLN Deputy and Spokesperson Sigfredo Reyes told Polcouns that the entire series of articles represented a ARENA electoral effort that had, in his opinion, fallen flat. FMLN Presidential candidate told DCM on December 24 that the paramilitary ceremony was ill-advised, but characterized the medial campaign as politically inspired.

GOES PLANS TO GO TO OAS, and UN, BUT NOT YET

16. (U) Throughout the period of December 15 to December 19, the rhetoric surrounding these alleged armed groups reached a crescendo, with President Saca declaring in Washington that he was seeking the assistance of the FBI, the Organization of American States (OAS) and United Nations to investigate the origins of these groups. Both LPG and EDH began to link the existence of the groups to violent protests that occurred on July 5, 2006, in which a sniper killed two PNC Officers. Mario Belloso, a member of a leftist group was convicted in that killing. According to an article in El Diario de Hoy on December 18, when Belloso was arrested in 2007, his computer was seized, which allegedly contained information that "leftist groups were armed and ready for what was assumed would be the beginning of a new guerilla action." The article later states that the National Civilian Police claim to have received reports of columns of seven to ten armed men practicing military maneuvers and guerilla tactics. Further, the article claims that young children and teenagers are receiving this training and political indoctrination.

17. (C) ON December 23, the Foreign Minister, supported by the GOES National Security Council, briefed the diplomatic corps on the presence of armed groups. They highlighted the Belloso case and showed slides similar to the ones appearing in the media. Foreign Minister Marisol Argueta in a newspaper interview on January 5, reiterated the GOES promise to report fully to the OAS and UN.

18. (U) While the pace of articles on the topic has fallen off slightly in the past two weeks, new articles continue to be published containing additional allegations. On December 26, two articles appeared in El Diario de Hoy. In one, the paper claims that more illegal armed groups have been detected, but also goes on to explain that the government has yet to produce any evidence to the OAS or UN that any of the alleged groups exist. In the second article, President Saca links the existence of these armed groups to the attack on his motorcade in July 2007, in the town of Suchitoto.

19. (S/NF) On December 17, Acting RSO met with PNC Criminal Intelligence Division Inspector Douglas Zometa. Zometa said that, despite the rhetoric seen in the papers, the PNC has no concrete information to substantiate the existence of these armed groups. He explained that, contrary to the press reports, the PNC has received no calls on its tip or emergency lines about these groups, nor have any PNC officers reported encountering these groups while on patrol or while stationed in the areas mentioned in the articles. Zometa categorized the press reports as "military intelligence fairytales" that the Salvadoran military has been flogging for several years, but for which no concrete proof has ever been offered. As evidence, Zometa pointed out that no reports had offered names of the leaders of the groups or details of their manifestos. Further, he said the reporting in the press matched the reporting that has been offered by the Ministry of Defense to PNC for the last several years, with no real variation. Zometa explained that if these groups have existed for the past several years, as claimed, one would expect some

variation in their reported size. On January 2, Acting RSO again contacted Zometa and confirmed that, even with the continued press reports, the PNC had developed no concrete information to support the allegations. (Note: DAO has reporting on this topic, dating back to November 2006, containing additional details that may not be available to the PNC but which DAO believes supports the veracity of the claims. See San Salvador DAO IIR dated 081218. End note.)

¶10. (S/NF) While Zometa categorically stated that, based on the evidence at hand, there is no danger to U.S. citizens from these alleged armed groups, he also explained that the potential for election-related violence is real. He said the PNC has seen a marked increase in political indoctrination, particularly by the FMLN, of high-school and university students. He explained that teams have been traveling through the country, holding rallies and conducting voter education. He stated that while some of these activities have to do with ensuring people understand the platforms of the parties and their rights as voters, there have also been reports that the FMLN has been readying people to protest should the election not go their way. (Note: The FMLN has made similar accusations about ARENA. End Note.) Zometa is concerned that these protests could turn violent.

¶11. (C) Comment: The timing of press allegations of armed groups operating in areas controlled by rebel forces during the Salvadoran Civil War strongly suggests an ARENA-backed effort aimed at January 18 elections. However, the Belloso case and other acts of violence by thuggish university organizations do demonstrate a pattern of FMLN association with fringe, armed radical groups. The broader threat of election-related violence and civil unrest, is a concern which the Embassy is monitoring closely. The Embassy continues its preparations, including a robust security program, for election observation efforts on January 18, which will be addressed SEPTEL. RSO continues to coordinate with Peace Corps, Consular, and OSAC to ensure appropriate information is passed to the private American community as well. Embassy EAC will meet soon to evaluate the Embassy's pre-election security posture.

GLAZER